

Sino-Japanese War, 1931–45

A conflict that claimed 20 million lives began with one missing soldier at Marco Polo Bridge

Japanese ascendancy

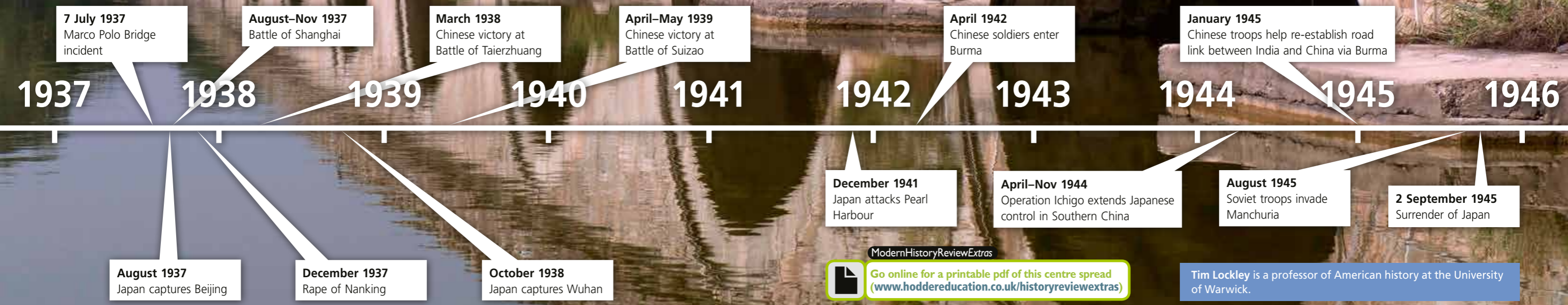
The early twentieth century had seen a continued decline of Chinese influence and the growth of Japanese power on the Asian mainland. Having already annexed Korea in 1910, Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931. Further encroachment into a politically weakened China followed. In the summer of 1937 a relatively minor skirmish between Chinese and Japanese troops (the Marco Polo Bridge incident) quickly escalated into a war, partly because the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek decided to resist further Japanese demands. Despite meeting more military resistance than expected, the Japanese quickly captured Beijing, Shanghai and the Chinese capital Nanking. The systematic slaughter of several hundred thousand civilians in Nanking became known as the 'Rape of Nanking'.

US support of China

In 1938 and 1939 Japan consolidated its gains on the coast but found it impossible to defeat Chinese forces decisively, despite the massive use of indiscriminate bombing campaigns. Periodic Chinese military successes and a refusal to negotiate led to a stalemate. Japan lacked the manpower to occupy China while China lacked the military resources to defeat Japan. China's geopolitical importance changed dramatically after the Japanese attack on the US Navy at Pearl Harbour. The entrance of the USA into the Second World War, and particularly the Pacific theatre, transformed China into an important ally. The USA and Britain began to supply China with military hardware and in return Chinese soldiers intervened to help the allies in Burma and Indochina.

Japan surrenders

For the remainder of the Second World War, periodic Japanese successes were offset by Chinese guerrilla tactics, and Japanese control of key cities was never extended to the Chinese countryside. The main significance of this theatre of war was that it tied up Japanese military resources that might have been decisive elsewhere. When Japan surrendered following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it still occupied large parts of mainland China. China was treated as one of the major victorious powers and granted a seat on the UN Security Council. All the territory Japan had seized since 1895 was returned to China. The Sino-Japanese war, like that in Russia, was marked by a very high death toll. Official Chinese sources state that c.20 million people were killed between 1937 and 1945, most of them civilians. Relations between China and Japan remain soured by this conflict.



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